

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

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Dear Réamonn

Thank you for your letter of 7 October 2021. I apologise for the delay in responding, which was due to an administrative error. I note the important issues you raise about the provision of languages in the curriculum and in particular the uptake of languages at GCSE and A Level. I would assure you that my Department is working closely with education support bodies to consider how best to promote and support the uptake of modern languages.

I thought it would be helpful if I firstly set out the background to languages within the Northern Ireland curriculum, before addressing the issues you have raised.

Languages have never been a compulsory element of the primary curriculum. Whilst language teaching is not compulsory, the curriculum provides flexibility for primary schools to provide pupils with the opportunities to learn an additional language, such as Irish, where the necessary expertise is available either during core teaching hours or as an extra-curricular activity.

Modern languages are compulsory at Key Stage 3 and a qualification choice at Key Stage 4 and post-16. At Key Stage 3, all pupils must study an official language of the European Union (other than English and, in Irish speaking schools, Irish). Post-primary schools may provide additional languages at Key Stages 3 and 4, such as Irish but this will depend on available teaching resources and the level of pupil demand.

The British Council's Language Trends in Northern Ireland Survey in 2019 indicated that fifty-five per cent of responding primary schools offer language teaching. I am aware that this figure significantly dropped in the 2021 survey that indicated that just fifteen percent of responding schools were teaching a language during the COVID crisis. However, thirty-eight percent of primary schools responded that they usually

teach a language reported but this had been temporarily suspended due to COVID-19. The number of schools responding to the survey also dropped due to the pandemic.

Current support for languages in the Curriculum

Clearly, the development of language skills has an important role in economic prosperity, social cohesion, and the acceptance of diverse cultural identities. Research highlights that additional language acquisition offers significant cognitive development as well as social and economic benefits and that young learners have a particular capacity to learn a new language successfully.

The Department continues to support the promotion of language learning in schools and the provision of professional learning opportunities through funding of around £480,000 per annum. This represents a significant level of investment and includes supporting the Confucius Institute Classroom Programme which provides Mandarin language lessons to around 20,000 pupils in primary and post-primary schools across Northern Ireland. In addition, the Department funds the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (NICILT) to promote languages to pupils and provide a range of professional development opportunities for modern language teachers. My Department also funds the British Council's International Education Programme (IEP). This includes the Language Assistant Programme that enables language students from the UK to work in countries overseas as English Language Assistants and brings language students from overseas to work as Modern Language Assistants in schools here.

Since 2011, the Department has also provided annual funding to An Gaeláras to deliver the Léargas Irish Language Programme to 15 primary schools in the North-West. An Gaeláras was established in 1984 and is an Irish language, arts and cultural organisation. Its Léargas programme aims to enhance the linguistic and cognitive ability of Key Stage 2 pupils through various language learning activities with the added benefit of introducing them to, and developing their interest in, the Irish language and culture. The organisation is at the forefront of efforts to create a bilingual community in which the Irish language is encouraged, promoted and fostered.

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) produces a range of resources to support modern languages at GCSE, including: specimen assessment materials; past papers; fact files; student guidance; exemplification of examination performance; grammar advice; and advice on the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They also produce a range of resources to support modern languages at A Level, including: past papers; teacher guidance; schemes of work; fact files; study cards; and exemplification of examination performance.

My Department will be working with CCEA to consider how best to update and develop their modern languages resources for primary schools resources in 2022/23.

Requirement to take a language at GCSE

Post-primary schools are required to meet the requirements of the Entitlement Framework which stipulates that 21 courses must be offered to pupils at both Key Stage 4 and at post-16. Of these, at least one third should be general courses and at least one third should be applied courses. All schools receive delegated budgets, through the Common Funding Scheme, to enable Boards of Governors and Principals to use resources in accordance with individual school's needs and priorities, including the effective delivery of the curriculum.

It is a matter for schools to determine which qualifications to offer depending on pupil demand, timetabling and teaching resources available. Schools can decide not to run courses due to low demand or timetabling issues. The flexibility provided to schools through the Entitlement Framework means that they can take account of up-to-date labour market information, skills shortages and projected areas for growth in the economy, in widening and reviewing their curricular offer for pupils.

It is worth noting that while the number doing GCSE Irish has dropped, the actual proportion of entry (% of total entry) has remained stable for the past 10 years (around 1%) the proportion of entry at A Level has also remained stable at around 1%.

Education Languages Strategy

CCEA is currently undertaking a review of current language provision. This will provide a report and recommendations on the future of languages. This work will consider all recent research into modern languages and will seek to provide a comprehensive plan to further promote and develop languages in Northern Ireland schools. The report is due to be complete by March 2022.

CCEA has also engaged directly with key stakeholders and in December 2021 established a Modern Languages Programme Board (MLPB) and I am pleased to note that Mr Tennyson (Chair of An Gréasán) is a member.

The purpose of the MLPB is to advise on matters relating to curriculum support and to qualifications in the development of modern languages in our education sector (primary and post-primary). The MLPB provides the opportunity for cross-sector engagement with, and cohesion of, activities in the sector. The focus is on modern languages across the Key Stages, specifically with the aim of exploring issues relating to: introducing modern languages at primary level; strengthening modern languages at Key Stage 3; increasing the uptake of languages at GCSE, and GCE A level (Irish, Spanish, French and German); and communication of key messages to Boards of Governors, parents, school leaders and young people which will be supported by all key stakeholders and employer groups to promote understanding of the benefits and skills associated with language uptake.

Careers advice in relation to Irish and other languages

My Department is working with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) to implement recommendations relating to Irish-medium education in the “A Fair Start” report. These include the promotion of teaching in the Irish-medium sector as a career path in post-primary schools. Proposals have been developed and funding secured in the 2021/22 Financial Year to begin this work. It is intended that CnaG will secure additional human resource to take forward, among other things, marketing of careers in the Irish-medium sector. The Department expects this will support wider awareness raising in relation to the study of Irish and other languages, and it will continue to engage with CnaG about this.

Primary Modern Languages Programme

The decision to end the Primary Modern Languages Programme (PMLP) was based on the need to protect frontline services, and in particular the Aggregated Schools Budget, at a time when the education budget was facing significant pressures. It was simply not possible to maintain all services and programmes at the existing levels, even though it was recognised that many of them were doing important work. In the current constrained financial climate and with the draft budget proposing a reduction in the Department’s baseline for next year, I have no plans at present to commission a new Primary Modern Languages Scheme.

I also note that there were a number of issues in regard to the delivery model for the PMLP. Notably, there was limited professional development and capacity building for teaching staff through the Programme.

Concerns regarding grading of GCSE and A Level Languages

In the light of similar research carried out by Ofqual, in autumn 2019, the Department commissioned CCEA Regulation to undertake a review of grading standards in modern foreign languages at GCSE and A-Level. Officials are considering the findings of the draft GCSE and A Level reports, which have been completed by CCEA.

Initial Teacher Education, Gaeltacht Courses and extra-curricular Irish language learning opportunities

My Department is responsible for determining the number of students admitted each year to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses offered in Northern Ireland. Intake numbers are based on a number of relevant factors, including the predicted future need for teachers across our education system. For 2021/22, the ITE intake across all courses were maintained at the previous year’s level of 580 places. This figure includes 46 teachers being trained specifically for Irish-medium Education – 20 through the one-year Irish-medium Primary PGCE in St. Mary’s University College, 18 through the four-year BEd programme at St. Mary’s and a total of 8 in the one-year Post-Primary PGCE courses offered at Queen’s University Belfast and the Ulster University.

Within the one-year Irish-medium Primary PGCE course in St. Mary's, the Department provides funding to the University College for the provision of a "Gaeltacht" experience. The Gaeltacht dimension to the Irish-medium PGCE is a unique element of this one-year postgraduate programme. This funding has been provided since 2009.

As highlighted above, the Northern Ireland curriculum provides flexibility for primary schools to provide pupils with the opportunity to learn an additional language either during core teaching hours and for all schools as part of their extracurricular provision but ultimately each school in Northern Ireland has the autonomy to make its own decision on whether they do this.

The Department delegates as much funding and decision-making as possible to schools who are best placed to assess the needs of their pupils. As a result the Department does not endorse or recommend any particular commercial resource for use by schools. It is a matter for individual schools to determine which commercial resources they wish to use to support their delivery of the curriculum. Therefore, the best way to bring Gaeltacht courses to the attention of schools would be to approach them directly. Below is a link to the Schools+ database which provides contact details for all schools: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/services/schools-plus>

You may also wish to seek advice from NICILT which is based at Queen's University and can promote learning opportunities on their website.

If the learning opportunities are free to schools, I can also arrange for my officials to promote these through the C2k network.

Appointment of Irish language Commissioner

The Northern Ireland Office wrote to Ministers on 29 October 2021, noting their intention to progress the identity, language and culture legislation at Westminster, once parliamentary time allows.

I hope you find this information useful and that it addresses the issues you have raised.

A copy of this letter will be issued to the Chair of the Education Committee.

Regards

Michelle McIlveen

Michelle McIlveen MLA
Minister of Education